



Degrees of separation: identity formation while leaving ultra-orthodox Judaism

by Schneur Zalman Newfield, Pennsylvania, PA, Temple University Press, 2020, 248 pp., £ 23.42 (paperback), ISBN: 1439918961

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BOOK REVIEW

Degrees of separation: identity formation while leaving ultra-orthodox Judaism, by Schneur Zalman Newfield, Pennsylvania, PA, Temple University Press, 2020, 248 pp., £ 23.42 (paperback), ISBN: 1439918961

In his book, *Degrees of Separation*, Shneur Zalman Newfield, an Assistant Professor based in the City University of New York, explores the multiple dimensions of identity and its formation while leaving the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish sects of Satmar and Lubavitch. The book is divided into six chapters and the author considers the journeys of those exiting Orthodoxy, their individual narratives explaining the reasons for leaving their lifestyles, as well as a multitude of opinions on how to exist 'on the outside'. The 'outside' refers to living outside the boundaries of a religious community, and extensive exposure to the secular and non-Jewish world. The author's deliberations are based on the outcomes of 74 interviews conducted with Lubavitchers, Satmars, and participants from a Hungarian Hasidic sect.

The first chapter explores the historical context of the Satmar and Lubavitch Hasidic dynasties, and the manner in which they deal with defection. This historical context is essential for readers to be able to contextualize the challenges faced by the ones who are '*off the derech*' (meaning 'off the path', and often simply referred by the religious community members as the 'OTDs'). The author himself is an OTD from the Lubavitch Hasidic community; thanks to his positionality and exposure to both 'inside' and 'outside' experiences, it is possible for him to better understand the structural demands and duties expected from such communities, both when one is a member and when one has left. The challenges of living in the community include the strict observance of religious laws and dress code, and the control and scrutiny such rules impose in its members. Living outside the community is also problematic for the ex-Hasidic members as leaving is not a 'clear-cut' process. The leavers often find themselves in a state of 'floating' in between but are ultimately 'stateless. This idea, first introduced by Skonovd (1981), was effectively applied by the author to the Hasidic exiters to express the confusion, fear, and guilt that accompany them while leaving their sects.

In the second and third chapters, Newfield focuses his attention on the multiple communal and spiritual boundaries that are set within the orthodox communities, separating one group from another guarding their inherent rules and values, and the boundaries erected by the communities for protection against the Goyim (the non-Jews) and their secular lifestyle. In order to explain that the exiters are pathologized by community members and seen as mentally ill, the author turns to the ideas presented by Greenwald (2014) who looked at this phenomenon in the context of political elites, who when threatened, attack whistle-blowers and describe them as mentally unstable. However, he also highlights that these boundaries are permeable and are often transcended by the orthodox Jews. Newfield states that Lubavitchers do so more than Satmars as 'Lubavitch has emissaries around the world to conduct its outreach work and they meet non-Jews all the time' (p. 44).

Subsequently, the exit narratives are presented in detailed and ordered subsections, enriched with multiple quotes from the participants. Thanks to this, the readers are immersed in the participants' thinking processes and post-exit reflections. It also brings them closer to the experiences of the participants and the author himself and helps contextualize the emotional complexities and physical efforts present in the strenuous and complicated journey of exiting. In this section, the author also emphasizes the transformative and

deeply liminal aspect of leaving a religious community. The leavers take on, as named by the author, ‘intellectual’ or ‘social-emotional’ narratives that indicate the reasons why the former Satmar or Lubavitch members leave their respective groups: a community-imposed constraint to seek (secular) knowledge, to enable them to welcome a curious mind or provide answers to difficult questions, as well as a feeling of alienation from the community due to how the community prioritizes religion over individual well-being and people’s needs.

Within the fourth and fifth chapters, Newfield effectively illustrates that exiting religion is not a binary process—it is not as simple as being ‘in and “out”, and the exiters’ liminality is constant and challenging. The ‘bodily inscribed habits’ remain with the individuals, even when they relinquish their closed, Orthodox lives. Equally, the exiters’ habits, both physical, such as eating kosher food, and mental, including the perceptions on or even acceptance of strong gender divisions, are continually ubiquitous and often hidden in their subconsciousness.

The principal strengths of this book lie in the author’s clear and accessible yet eloquent language. Its second major strength is the qualitative methodological approach used as a tool to conduct in-depth interviews. Conceptually rich and detailed interviews from a high number of participants from Satmar, Lubavitch and Hungarian Hasidic dynasties offer a wide range of ‘in-context’ knowledge and provide a variety of examples of the different, yet often surprisingly similar, points of view and rationales for quitting the ultra-orthodox lifestyle. Due to such richness and quantity of data the validity and reliability of the study are augmented.

In addition, a strong and rigorous methodological approach is necessary to avoid the reflexivity bias of which the author is aware. The author shows his reflexivity by using his previous ‘inside’ experience to facilitate connections with the interviewees. While he is mindful of his positionality, his transparency and closeness to the interviewees allows an open discussion. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that due to his position, not all interviewees are fully comfortable sharing certain experiences with him, especially Lubavitchers as they come from the same sect background.

The author effectively applies a wide range of sociological theories such as Mauss’s and Bourdieu’s meanings of ‘habitus’, or Goffman’s and Ebaugh’s ideas of ‘the internalization of institutions’. For instance, Newfield grounds his research in Goffman’s (1963) and Coser’s (1974) theories of ‘institutionalized rigid conformity’ by exposing the experiences of the controlled, institutionalized lives of the exiters and their liminal journeys that continue over an extensive time period. Goffman’s theoretical underpinnings are effectively incorporated in the interview questions and subsequently reflected in the responses, especially when the participants discuss the rigid upbringing and strict values from which they struggle to disengage, and which continue to shape their identities throughout their lives. Furthermore, the author places a strong emphasis on providing diverse examples of raw emotional personal accounts from the interviewees and adequately links these to the theoretical perspectives. For instance, he successfully links one participant’s account of the community’s stories about his exit to Gluckman’s (1963) argument that gossip is a social construct that is used to exert social control and retain the unity of the group. Consequently, the author demonstrates his strong scholarship as well as his sensitivity to his own and other participants’ individual narratives that expose the entrapment and liminality of individuality and self-identity in the named Ultra-Orthodox communities.

Conclusions at the end of each chapter, and the addition of appendices outlining the demographics of the participants, methods of study, and interview schedules provide a clear organizational structure. The glossary explaining Yiddish and Hebrew vocabulary used by the participants is particularly helpful as many readers might not be familiar with

the Yiddish and Hebrew terminology used by the author and the study participants, and without understanding the used language, it is impossible to fully understand the exiters' views of their individual journeys.

From a more data presentation-driven and description-focused perspective, the book would benefit from an additional appendix in which some of the collected qualitative data could be presented in a simple quantified manner, for instance, in a table with the numbers of the participants and their respective views. This could be useful to the reader as there is some ambiguity describing the participants' views, such as: 'some participants say' or 'several Lubavitchers claim'. There are many accounts of such general observations, but after some time, it becomes confusing for the reader, and it is difficult to remember who said what and when. Therefore, a visual illustration of the quantified data in a form of a table or a chart would be advantageous.

Overall, Newfield's *'Degrees of Separation'* is a fascinating and inspiring read that challenges readers to consider the religious periphery of religious exiters and the development of their new journeys. It prompts the ultra-Orthodox institutional hierarchies and how such communities view and deal with religious rebellion and dissent. Most importantly, it opens a door to a largely unknown world full of mysticism and tradition and highlights the struggle against its oppressive systems. Newfield's own positionality as an ex-Lubavitcher and the realization of his own transcending liminality make this book a very informative yet intimate story—a story of belonging, curiosity, and bravery but also loss and grief. It is not only about the real challenges of religious communities, but also, growth, relationships, and survival, and every reader, regardless of their beliefs and own background, will be able to locate a piece of oneself in it.

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